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WHEN GREEK MEETS ANGLO-SAXON

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Not so long ago the effect of the American college (notably, of course, Harvard) upon the literary life of America was very conspicuous. Now the effect is very inconspicuous. The fresh literary movement at present rising in our country is sharply dis-severed, unlike its predecessor of a century ago, from the collegiate study of literature. And yet that study, particularly the study of English in our graduate schools, has now become so vast that young Longfellow, Lowell, and Emerson, if resurrected as college students, would gasp at it. Why, then, such a chasm between our academic literary study and our creative literary life? Because both have reacted, in opposite directions, from the literary state of affairs which was dominant in the middle of the past century; and because both have irrationally kept on reacting when the time for *rapprochement* and reconstruction is here. On the one horizon is our literary life, determined to be anything but academic; certainly it is lively and "red-blooded," but its *supply* of life-blood is thin because not nourished on the past. On the opposite horizon is our literary graduate school, seemingly determined to be anything but literary. Its predicament seems to me the more pressing of the two, for, withdrawn from the life of the present, it is now missing also the best life of the past.

Our literary graduate school is the result of a reaction from the loose and inexact methods of literary study prevalent in the earlier nineteenth century. But unfortunately this reaction, natural and beneficent enough in itself, became too intimately entangled, under the influence of German literary scholarship, with the prevailing scientific tendencies of the past fifty years. Scientific method is valuable in the periphery of literary study; but our graduate schools have carried it to the center and have allowed it largely to displace

the true center. Waiving just now the question of instructional methods, surely it is unquestionable that at the center of literary study should be great literature. One would assume that for the student who is proceeding to the degree of Ph.D. in English, for example, the primary requirement would be an advanced knowledge of the chief masterpieces in that literature; that the secondary requirement would comprise masterpieces in one or more foreign literatures; and that minor pieces of literature would be relegated to the optional field. But in our typical graduate school just the reverse is the case. Literary masterpieces are largely in the optional field. In the required field are certain minor pieces of English, belonging to the Anglo-Saxon and Middle English periods; and often some minor pieces of foreign literature, also medieval. These pieces have considerable value only from the "scientific" standpoint, and they should be obligatory only for the comparatively few students who aim at a philological or scholastic career. Since most graduate students of English are preparing to teach this subject to the youths in our colleges—and not to teach it, one hopes, in a predominantly philological or scholastic manner—the official emphasis should be transferred from second-rate medieval writings to literature of first-rate quality. This cannot be accomplished by *weakening* requirements, in concession to the dilettante and the opportunist; nor by abolishing requirements altogether, in concession to the ultra-radical. It can be accomplished by placing the requirements (to say nothing of their extent) in the field of the best English literature, and the best foreign literature of modern or Greco-Latin times.

This conclusion is evaded by defenders of the present doctoral system through dubious and conflicting arguments. Some take the offensive and declare that the undergraduate college, not the graduate school, is the place for the literary study of literature. Others take the defensive and urge that, whatever the official emphasis in the graduate school may be, in practice the student receives all possible aid and encouragement in developing his particular literary ability. Consider, then, the following authentic story, which is broadly typical. A certain student in one of our colleges (call him *Adolescens*) succeeded in discovering in his fourth

year that he had interest and ability in the study of poetic drama; but that his knowledge of this subject was shallow and limited to a few English specimens. He proceeded to one of our leading graduate schools with the purpose of specializing in the Elizabethan drama and of studying, comparatively, the classic drama of Greece; his practical goal being the English Ph.D. and a position as college teacher. Eager to begin the study of Greek, he was faced with the requirement of several courses in medieval language, including a year of Anglo-Saxon. Having absolved these, he laid his whole case before the professor in charge (call him Grammaticus), requesting approbation of his desire now to plunge into Greek. Grammaticus, however, averred that it would be wiser to continue the work now begun in the medieval field; adding that one might, if one so desired, get up one's Greek in summer schools. Adolescents, overbalanced by the scholarly weight of Grammaticus and also needing his favor for vocational purposes, continued the study of Anglo-Saxon; and of course he refrained, as most healthy young men would, from studying Greek in summer schools.

After looking upon that picture, now look on this. Mr. Edgar Lee Masters, author of *The Spoon River Anthology* and seeker of new paths for the present lively movement in American poetry, is an ardent student of Greek. I should say that Mr. Masters loves Greek well but, judging from his verses, not too wisely. His style moves on the tumbling plains of barbarous Anglo-Saxon rather than toward "the skyish head of blue Olympus." But what if poor Adolescents, deeply versed in Greek, had had the privilege of teaching English dramatic poetry, in one of our colleges, to a nascent follower of Mr. Masters? The effect of the American college upon American literature might have become one grain less inconspicuous.